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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, August 6, 2009

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Savannah River Site Workers Enter Pioneering Reactor for First Time in More Than a Decade

Recovery Act accelerates needed closure

Aiken, S.C. (Aug. 6) - One of the many relics that marked the birth of the nuclear age in America has stood as an aging icon at the Savannah River Site (SRS) for nearly a half-century. Now, with funding to accelerate site cleanup through the Recovery Act, the Heavy Water Components Test Reactor (HWCTR), otherwise known to SRS employees as 'Hector,' is destined for decontamination and decommissioning.

Construction began on the test reactor in early 1959 with the mission to test experimental fuel assemblies for commercial heavy-water power reactors. It remained active until 1964 when the government opted to pursue other reactor designs for commercial electrical power generation.

In 1965, fuel assemblies were removed, systems that contained heavy water were drained, fluid piping systems were drained, de-energized and disconnected and the spent fuel basin was drained and dried. The doors of the reactor were shut and it wasn't until more than 30 years later that decommissioning plans were considered and ultimately postponed due to budget constraints.

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It was during this time that a team of retired SRS engineers who once worked at the reactor were reunited to enter ‘Hector’ for the first time since the doors were officially closed in 1965. Their mission was to document how the reactor functioned and identify potential hazards that may still be looming within the reactor walls. Although their efforts proved invaluable to understanding, and ultimately planning the facility’s closure, DOE had no choice but to defer the dismantlement leaving the HWCTR in an extended surveillance and maintenance mode.

The more than \$1.6 billion allocation to SRS for site cleanup at SRS has opened the reactor again – this time for final closure to the story of ‘Hector.’”

Opening the old reactor for the first time since 1996 closure effort was an inspiring moment for project manager Tony Long. “The first thing we have to do is get in there and see what we’re dealing with,” he says. “We have to open it up, and verify that the facility is safe for workers to enter. Then we can perform the necessary work to declare it officially cold and dark, which just means it is void of all forms of hazardous energy, like electricity.”

Currently in the planning phases, the team expects to decommission the reactor vessel and steam generators, remove the 75-foot dome, grout the remaining structure in place, and install a concrete cover over the building footprint by September 2011.

For SRS workers who have passed by the reactor, many for their entire careers, its final closure comes as a bitter-sweet milestone. Even though the technology tested there was ultimately not selected as a viable technology, it marked an exciting period in America’s birth of commercial nuclear power.

“This is an exhilarating time at SRS,” says Diana Hannah, project manager for the DOE. “The Recovery Act has brought new life to this project and we look forward to the opportunity to write the final chapter of the ‘Hector’ story at SRS.”

Final completion of the HWCTR is expected in late fiscal year 2011.

Additional information on the Department of Energy’s Office of Environmental Management and the Savannah River Site, can be found at <http://www.em.doe.gov> or <http://www.srs.gov>. For more information about the SRS Recovery Act Project, please visit www.srs.gov/recovery. Follow SRS news on twitter also: www.twitter.com/SRSNews.

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